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THE PROPOSED TAX ON SERVANTS

BY MARY SARGENT POTTER

SHALL servants be taxed? That is to say, shall a tax be imposed upon domestics to be paid by employers?

To the already distraught housewife facing problems in economy and conservation which, if the desired results are to be achieved, tax her time, attention and ingenuity to the utmost, and with the domestic labor market disorganized as never before in the history of our country, this proposed legislation appears as insult added to injury.

It is a serious matter, striking, not as it is made to appear, at the luxurious and comfort loving class, but at what every woman has been brought up to believe is the foundation of the nation: that is, The Home. Whether she is poor or rich, whether her responsibilities are obscure or wide, whether she is home maker for the humble citizen or for one of the leaders of men, no woman can make home what it should be without adequate assistance. No woman, whatever her ability and strength, can give her time to cooking, washing and cleaning, and still have left the mental and spiritual freshness, which are primary requisites for the proper care and development of her children, and for the refreshment and inspiring of her husband. I do not here refer even to her civic duties and outside responsibilities, I am speaking only of the necessities for adequate home life.

If it be said that the proposed tax is merely a war time measure, with its objective the releasing of domestic labor for munition works, and that the leisure women can best serve their country by undertaking their own house work, I would first answer that a very large percentage of women in domestic service are not physically fitted for factory work;

second, that there is no leisure class of women in America, for every woman of intelligence and cultivation is giving her time and strength to "war work," and the third objection is that never in the history of the world has there been a time when home life was so difficult and so important as now. With the disintegration of the whole social fabric, homes all over the world destroyed never to be rebuilt, families disrupted never to be re-united, it becomes of prime importance that the children in the homes which remain, should have the spiritual stamp of Home more firmly impressed than ever before. In view of these facts does a woman need whatever assistance she can secure, or is it a legitimate war measure to put such help beyond her reach?

Home, in its broad sense, is not a boarding house, a mere shelter, a place in which to eat and sleep. For the children it is primarily a school for character, a center from which should radiate every helpful activity, and for the adults it should be the refuge to which they joyfully return for rest and refreshment, for physical and mental renewal. To this end, system, order, cleanliness, good food are essential. Intellect and ideals must be prominent, and above all the pervading personality of the home maker who must, as the need arises be prepared to give strength, understanding, wise injunctions, sympathetic councils.

In the name of common sense, how can a woman who gives her time and strength to the manual labor of her house, bear and rear a family and make a home which is not a nightmare of disorder and spiritual depression? Why should servants to carry on this necessary and important work be a fit object for taxation any more than the mechanics in the aeroplane factories or the defenders of our nation? I plead for the children and for the children's homes.

It can with truth be said that the majority of women in the world do and have always done their entire domestic work. They have borne and reared their children, they have cooked and scrubbed and washed. And look at the results! I do not speak for the women, poor, nervous, gallant wrecks that they are, but for those beings for whom home was instituted—the children. Who that knows the physical and spiritual condition of the children of our poor would want any system perpetuated under which the mother does all the manual work of the home and has no time for intellectual growth or physical rest? Rather than deeming servants a luxury to

be taxed like platinum jewelry, fine clothes, automobiles and wines so that their number diminishes, and in the end only the very rich can command their services, I wish with all my heart that the problem might be attacked from a different angle, wish that there might be a grade of servant within the reach of every mother in the land, that there might be more servants, more efficient servants, respecting themselves and their work in a manner heretofore unknown.

Let us institute a new régime, under which the work of the servant class is put on the same basis as to hours, wages, competency as that of clerk and shop girl, factory and office worker.

I would suggest that servants—except in rural districts—live out of the home, that they work eight hours a day, and that in homes where more than one servant is employed they work in two shifts, since the work of the home must, on an average, be carried on for sixteen hours out of the twenty-four. At once a cry of alarm is raised. "But the expense! No one, with the present high wages, would be able to afford adequate service." But a slight examination of facts shows this fear to be groundless. It is true that the price of lodging would have to be added to the existing wage; but when against this is balanced the furniture, bedding, washing materials, gas, careless waste of electricity, larger houses and apartments to include servants' quarters, the difference would not be enormous. Offsetting it would be the inestimable comfort and quiet of having the worker, her work satisfactorily finished, withdraw altogether. The second objection, that such a scheme involves double the number of servants is also without foundation. A woman who has an eight-hour working day expects to work steadily during the eight hours, as does every mechanic, every factory laborer, every shop girl and stenographer, and any woman can do in eight hours' consecutive, intelligent work as much as is now done by two average servants in the course of a whole day. Expert work would be expected and demanded.

There is no reason why there should be such specialization as now exists in housework. A well-trained housemaid, working from seven to three o'clock could prepare and serve a simple breakfast, do the beds and dust the rooms while a second and third worker coming on from twelve to eight as cook and waitress could carry on the later requirements of the household. Where later hours are exacted there should

be extra pay for extra time, and the evening shift could in all instances receive higher compensation than the morning shift. The former would probably be largely recruited from the older women who no longer so ardently care for the freedom of the evening hours, as do their younger sisters. The morning shift could frequently be filled by young married women whose circumstances justify their assuming outside duties during a part of the day. In the case of the household where only "one in help" is employed, I feel certain that the housewife would infinitely prefer to undertake certain definite duties herself if she could count upon eight hours of well-trained assistance, rather than the present longer hours of slack, grudging work with which she must often content herself. Which hours should be undertaken by her employee would largely depend on her own occupations. In some cases she would wish to be free to give certain hours to husband and children, in others for her own pursuits whether they be of a professional or artistic nature.

Once put domestic labor on this basis, with adequate training schools for every kind of work pertaining to the home, instruction in manners, dress and general deportment to which every shop girl, so envied for her freedom, must submit, and I venture to say that a larger number of women and a better class of women would immediately enter the ranks of domestic labor. It is the "freedom" of her sisters in commercial life which the average servant so longs for. Well, let her, too, be free. It is the long hours "on duty" even though a large part of those hours are spent sitting idle, which she grudges. And in this I think that her complaint is justified. In shop and office and factory, in hospital and school, there are definite hours of work—and the hours are not intolerably long—followed by periods of absolute freedom. The same system should and must come to the home, and it is for the employer class to institute the change. The housewife will be adequately rewarded by work well and intelligently done, by greater system, and by cheerful pride in labor well performed.

For the sake of the American home and the American woman may not our domestic labor be put on a thoroughly business basis? And may it not for the duration of the war be considered as essential as any other form of labor which releases the more highly-trained minds for the tasks which so pressingly confront us? MARY SARGENT POTTER.